

## Teaching-Track Economists in the United Kingdom

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Teaching-track economists<sup>2</sup> in the United Kingdom have a markedly different role to their North American counterparts. Through our research, we find they have a diverse portfolio of responsibilities, with greater emphasis on scholarship and administration than their peers in Canada and the United States. We identify strong parallels in terms of promotion and job security to UK research-track economists, and evidence of the value placed on networking across universities. Our findings shed light on both opportunities and challenges of the track that are relevant for academic economists interested in or already on this career path, as well as for department leadership and university management.

This is a companion paper to Arico et al. (2024) and builds on the comparison of teaching-track careers in economics in Canada, the United Kingdom and the United States. Using the same data and mixed-methods approach, which is explained in Arico et al. (2024) and its Online Appendices A and B, here we provide deeper insight into the system in the United Kingdom.

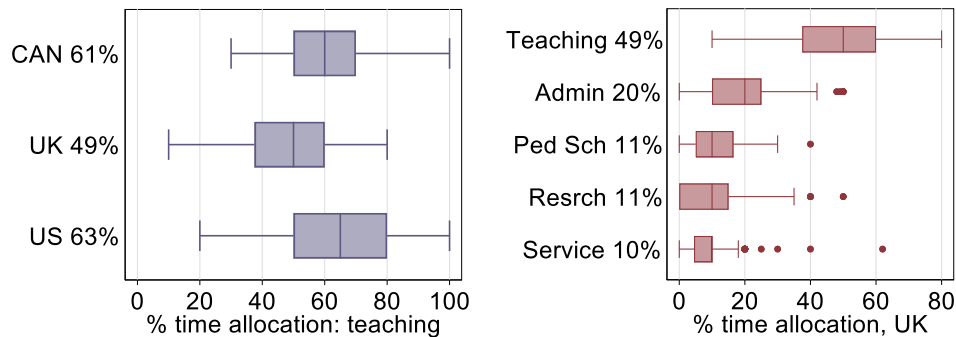
We believe that this is the first analysis to describe the landscape of teaching-track positions in the United Kingdom specifically focusing on economics. Smith and Walker (2022) document increased recruitment of teaching-track academics at UK universities, particularly in research-intensive institutions, but do not look at specific disciplines.

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<sup>2</sup> We define teaching-track economists in detail in Arico et al. (2024) as academics who work in the same departments as traditional research-track economists, but with a greater emphasis on teaching. This definition excludes academics with potentially similar job description on positions where a parallel research-track does not exist. All exclusions are discussed in Arico et al. (2024).

Teaching-track economists make up a significant proportion of academics in UK economics departments with our survey respondents estimating that on average 31 percent of academics in their departments are in a teaching-track role. This is the highest self-reported representation in our international comparison.<sup>3</sup>

The Higher Education system in the UK is heavily regulated, with emphasis on teaching excellence in the evaluation of institutions through rankings and regulatory frameworks (Atherton, Lewis and Bolton, 2023). The hiring of teaching-track academics may form part of universities' response to this focus within Higher Education.



**Figure 1.** Distinct UK Conception of the Multifaceted Role of Teaching-Track Economists

*Notes:* The survey asks: “Approximately what fraction of your time is allocated to the following areas?” Six areas are teaching, administrative/ managerial, pedagogical research/scholarship, economic research/scholarship, service/ citizenship, and other (not shown). Boxes show the 25<sup>th</sup>, 50<sup>th</sup>, and 75<sup>th</sup> percentiles (with whiskers and outside values also shown). The left axis reports the mean replies.

Our research shows that teaching-track economists in the United Kingdom have a different profile compared with their counterparts in North America, spending more time on scholarship and administrative duties and less time on tasks directly related to teaching. As shown in Figure 1, they report, on average, spending 49 percent of their time on teaching-related activities, which compares with 61 percent in Canada and 63 percent in the United States. However, scholarly work

<sup>3</sup> The comparable figures are 26 percent for the United States and 17 percent for Canada.

is reported to take up 22 percent of time (compared with 14 percent in Canada and 11 percent in the United States). A reported 20 percent of time is spent on administrative and managerial activities is at 20 per cent (compared with 10 percent in both Canada and the United States). The importance of activities beyond teaching is also evident in survey respondents' views of why they were hired. Among UK respondents, 21 percent believe that they were hired to take on an administrative role and 24 percent that they were hired to improve knowledge of pedagogy in their department. There is also a strong perception about the importance of teaching in hiring decisions: 69 percent think that they were hired to teach a specific course, 50 percent to cover growing student enrolment, 30 percent to develop new courses and 50 percent to improve teaching quality.

Just under a third (32 percent) of our UK survey respondents think that they were hired with the intention of reducing research-track colleagues' teaching loads. This was also a theme in the qualitative analysis. An interviewee exemplifies this stating: *“one [aim of hiring teaching-track economists is] to help the research faculty focus on research and [...] reduce their teaching responsibilities”*. Evaluation of research and allocation of government funding through the Research Excellence Framework (REF) may inform why teaching-track academics are more prevalent in more research-intensive institutions. Indeed, during the recruitment stage of this project, we found that institutions, referred to as post-1992 universities, do not have a separate economics teaching-track parallel to a research-track. At those institutions, academics tend to engage in both research and teaching, even though their teaching loads can be similar to those on dedicated teaching-tracks at other institutions.

Those on teaching-tracks in the United Kingdom have established positions, with 86 percent of survey respondents reporting they are on permanent contracts, equivalent to tenure or tenurable. A theme from our qualitative analysis is the degree of parity between teaching- and research-

focused contracts. Interviewees perceive that progress has been made with hiring and promotion procedures, which now appear more harmonized than in the past. One interviewee says: *“The basics of the contract are similar [...] the same degrees, same job titles”* and another says, *“I am on an open-ended contract, which is the same as [...] more traditional [roles]”*. Although contracts are relatively secure, 52 percent of UK respondents report that they worry about the impact of a change in departmental leadership on their position. The qualitative analysis highlights the importance of supportive leadership and a perceived fragility of the position when this leadership changes. One interviewee explains: *“I am very aware that, just now, I am in a quite supportive environment because of the leadership of the department”*. Another interviewee points to the perception that *“[job security can go] up and down depending on the [...] people at the top of the department”*.<sup>4</sup>

Among UK survey respondents, 69 percent said they agree or strongly agree with the statement: “I feel connected to the academic economics profession”, which is significantly higher than for Canada (48 percent) or the United States (49 percent). The sense of community among teaching-track economists is particularly striking; 76 percent of UK respondents say they agree or strongly agree with the statement: “There is a sense of community among teaching-focused faculty in my department”, which is the highest in our international study.<sup>5</sup>

Opportunities for networking seem particularly prevalent in the UK context, where 67 percent of survey respondents reported “network[ing] with teaching-focused faculty from other institutions”, compared with just 48 percent in Canada and 37 percent in the United States. Our qualitative analysis identified a theme around the support offered by existing UK networks that

<sup>4</sup> This concern about the potential impact of a change in leadership may be as true for research-track economists and it would be interesting for future research to establish whether the sense of security is different across the different tracks.

<sup>5</sup> This is significantly higher than in Canada (61 percent). The United States reports 69 percent.

help to foster the community. One interviewee says: *“The obvious place to go and engage with is the Economics Network or the Centre for Teaching and Learning in Economics [CTaLE]. Effectively, you start working with [...] professors in teaching and scholarship around the country”*.

Interviewees also report organizing departmental seminars and workshops, many of which have developed organically from the bottom up. As one academic describes: *“We [...] have away days or workshops, [including] big [...] day-long meetings [...]in which] we tend to discuss teaching matters as well as research”*. This trend of sharing experiences with others on the same track seems to be one of the success stories in the United Kingdom that emerges from our research.

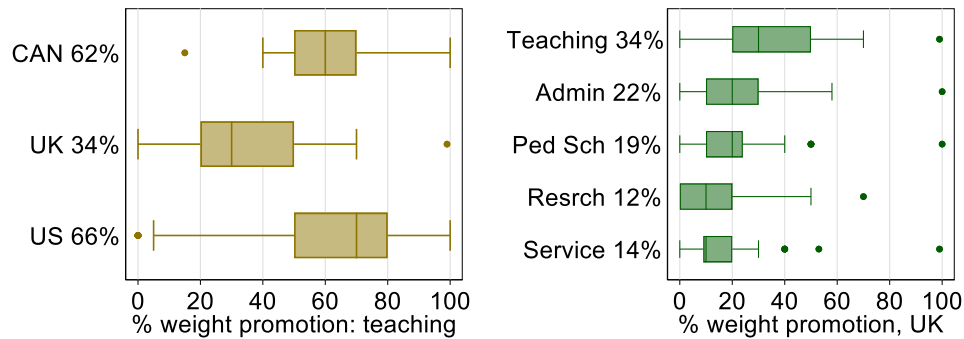
Although 77 percent of UK survey respondents agree or strongly agree that they are satisfied with their job overall, the qualitative analysis indicates that workload – related to both teaching and administrative tasks – is a concern for UK teaching-track economists.<sup>6</sup> Themes from our qualitative analysis were the demands of teaching large classes and the high administrative and managerial loads, which coincide during the teaching periods, intensifying the burden. An interviewee says: *“If you have got several classes running at once with several hundred students [...] the sheer volume of the number of students and the number of emails that you receive is sometimes difficult to manage during the semester”*. Survey responses reiterate this, with 21 percent of UK respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statement: *“I feel overwhelmed by the number of students I am expected to teach”*. In a similar question related to administrative duties, 27 percent of UK survey respondents report feeling overwhelmed, which is significantly higher than in the United States (14 percent).<sup>7</sup> In the United Kingdom, there is an institutionalized

<sup>6</sup> While this has been a theme from our interviews, we cannot comment on how this compares to academics on research-tracks.

<sup>7</sup> In Canada the respective number was 23 percent, which is not significant.

emphasis on quality assurance, with periodic assessment through the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) for example. Resulting processes such as verification of draft examination papers, marking, and changes to courses by independent academics from other institutions all add to the time required for administrative duties.

Another theme in the interviews was that there is little time to engage with scholarship. One interviewee comments: *“You don't get the time, but [...] get promotion for [...] scholarship in education”*. And another interviewee who receives an allowance for scholarship says: *“10 percent scholarship [time] [...] is more ‘a joke’. But [...] better to have 10 percent than nothing.”*



**Figure 2.** Multifaceted Promotion Criteria

*Notes:* The survey asks: “To the best of your knowledge, what is the approximate weight of each of the following factors in the promotion decision?” Six areas are teaching, administrative/ managerial, pedagogical research/scholarship, economic research/scholarship, service/ citizenship, and other (not shown). Boxes show the 25<sup>th</sup>, 50<sup>th</sup>, and 75<sup>th</sup> percentiles (with whiskers and outside values also shown). The left axis reports the mean replies.

Figure 2 summarizes the perceived weights for activities relevant for promotion. Comparing these data with those in Figure 1 shows that scholarship and administration is perceived to be more heavily weighted in promotions than the time teaching-track economists can allocate to these activities. Specifically, UK survey respondents report spending 22 percent of their time on pedagogical and disciplinary research and scholarship but believe it has an average weight of 31

percent for promotion decisions. This suggests a gap between what teaching-track economists spend their time on and what they need to be doing for promotion.<sup>8</sup>

A related theme from the interviews is a lack of clarity around what scholarship in teaching and learning (SoTL) means, and how it is assessed and valued across institutions. As an interviewee explains when asked about the definition of scholarship: *“I don't think people actually really know, and I'm including just about everyone in that statement”*. This finding is consistent with that of Smith and Walker (2022) and may be due to the breadth of the definition of SoTL. The literature suggests that it includes pedagogy, disciplinary research and activities such as workshops, training or curriculum innovations that build on critical reflection, and published evidence with a view to impacting and improving the practice of others (Trigwell and Shale, 2004). This uncertainty about how scholarship is evaluated is one aspect of a wider sense of opacity around promotion criteria. Only 50 percent of UK survey respondents agree or strongly agree that “the requirements for renewal of contract or tenure promotion are clear”.

The combination of time constraints and uncertainty about promotion criteria contribute to a theme in the qualitative analysis – that promotion, particularly to senior levels, is difficult to attain. An interviewee emphasizes: *“The criteria [...are] a bit crazy for professorship when you go for T&S. It's almost [...] worldwide impact on the discipline”*. While it should not come as a surprise that the bar to reach professorship is high, our findings suggest that the issue is not the criteria themselves but the extent to which they are considered feasible in terms of time availability. As this interviewee suggests: *“I will never be able to publish as much pedagogical research [...] as my research-focused colleagues... Just because I don't have the same amount of time”*.

<sup>8</sup> We are not able to comment on how this compares to research-track economists.

Teaching-track economists make up a substantial proportion of academics in UK economics departments, spending a significant amount of their time on scholarship and administrative duties as well as teaching. They work under similar contractual conditions to research-track economists, with permanent positions (tenure) and institutionally-determined career paths for both. Departmental and cross-institutional networks have provided a platform for engaging with peers on economics education research and practice. Yet, teaching-track economists perceive they are time constrained and lack clarity about what is needed for promotion, particularly to demonstrate scholarship expertise and impact. Our research provides a better understanding of who the UK teaching-track economists are, and what they do. This is a baseline for future research and discussions about this sizeable career path.

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